

Exploring Spanish and English academic language skills that support reading comprehension

What this research was about and why it is important

To what extent does proficiency in one language contribute to reading comprehension in another language? Although knowing one language well has been theorized to contribute positively to reading in another language, only minimal evidence supports this hypothesis in mid-adolescent students. In addition, despite research showing that academic language proficiency is important to reading comprehension, little is known about the concurrent development of Spanish and English academic language skills among mid-adolescents participating in Dual Language Immersion (DLI) education, in which instruction is provided in English and in the partner language, Spanish. Merging these two research areas (cross-linguistic relations and academic language) and using the Spanish and English versions of the Core Academic Language Skills (CALs) instrument, this study examined the extent to which dual academic language skills contributed to English reading comprehension in upper elementary students instructed in both languages at school. As expected, English academic language skills predicted English reading comprehension. More interestingly, results revealed that Spanish academic language skills also contributed significantly to English reading comprehension even after taking into account the contribution of students' English academic language skills, their English learner designation, and their socioeconomic status.

What the researchers did

- This study was conducted in collaboration with a Kindergarten to grade 8 Spanish-English DLI school in the northeastern U.S. interested in supporting students' reading comprehension skills in the upper elementary grades.
- Teachers worked with researchers in the fall to learn about a skillset known as Core Academic Language Skills (CALs) and to administer the CALs instruments in Spanish and English to a total of 101 students in grades 4 to 6 age 9-13).
- CALs include language skills students need in order to understand and produce middle-school texts across the content areas, for example, understanding connecting words (*en contraste con / in contrast; sin embargo / nevertheless*), understanding complex words and sentences, and tracking themes and participants throughout a text.
- Most participating students were of Latino/a ethnic background and were eligible for free or reduced priced lunch. Forty-percent of participants were designated as English Learners (students whose home language was not English and who also required support services in English language development).
- Reading comprehension performance was measured in the spring of the same school year using a state-mandated English language arts assessment.
- Researchers analyzed the data and provided descriptive grade-level reports to teachers regarding their students' performances in Spanish and English academic language skills using the CALs results.

What the researchers found

- Students differed vastly in their academic language proficiency performance within each grade level in both Spanish and English.
- Regardless of English Learner designation or socioeconomic background, students with higher CALs scores in English performed better in English reading comprehension than those with lower CALs scores.
- Students with higher CALs scores in Spanish performed better in English reading comprehension regardless of their scores in English CALs, their English Learner designation or their socioeconomic background.

Things to consider

- This study suggests that proficiency in academic language skills in Spanish and English, as measured by the CALs, may be important to reading comprehension for Spanish-English DLI students. Attention to this language skillset in classroom instruction may support students in understanding texts which become more complex in the upper elementary school years and beyond.
- For mid-adolescent students with Spanish as a home language, developing academic language proficiency in their home language as well as in English is likely to strengthen their reading proficiency.
- Future studies should measure DLI students' academic language skills growth in both Spanish and English over time and include Spanish reading comprehension outcomes to inform dual language pedagogy.
- Future studies with students instructed in two languages can focus on different language pairs, such as Mandarin and English, to examine if academic language proficiency in each language promote reading comprehension.

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